

An Afternoon with Hopkinson Smith

HOPKINSON SMITH is involved with music in such a pure and direct manner that he might best be described as a composer's performer, viewing each musical text as a hermetic entity demanding questions, discovery, analysis, sensitivity, and intimacy from the performer in order to unlock its secrets. There may be no other performer on the early music scene who has a broader mastery of plucked strings as well as a deep knowledge of the literature for each: 11- and 13-course Baroque lute, Renaissance lutes of all types, vihuela, Baroque guitar, Renaissance guitar, and theorbo. His innate natural curiosity, combined with an exceptionally broad and sharp intelligence, forms the driving animus behind his performances and recordings and is totally in service to the composer's intent.

You could be forgiven if you thought this is the way all music-making should be, especially within the realm of early music, but it has become an exceptionally rare thing to come across in a musical world more often dominated by flashiness, superficiality, personality, and budgets. Pure music-making on this level, where the performer is perfectly happy to take a back seat to the composer's intent, remains a rare and exquisite phenomenon to behold.

Born in New York in 1946, Hopkinson Smith graduated from Harvard with honors in music in 1972. The next year he went to Europe to study with Emilio Pujol in Catalonia and Eugen Dombois in Switzerland. He then became involved in numerous chamber music projects including the founding of the ensemble Hespèrion XX. Since the mid-80s, he has focused almost exclusively on the solo repertoires for early plucked instruments, producing a series of prize-winning recordings for Astrée. *Gramophone* called the recording of his lute arrangements of the Bach solo violin sonatas and partitas, released in the year 2000, "the best recording of these works on any instrument." His new recording with music from the world of Francesco da Milano was awarded a Diapason d'Or de l'Année (the French equivalent of a Grammy award) in November 2009 and has been called "the first recording to do justice to Francesco's reputation."

Smith has performed and given master classes throughout Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, Australia, and Japan, sometimes combining the life-style of a hermit with that of a gypsy. He teaches at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis.

Can you tell me more about the extra musical interests that occupied you before the lute took on a role of such importance in your life?

There are many interests that are all working in parallel to my playing on the lute and all kinds of early plucked instruments, and many different things fascinate me.... You know, one of the most enjoyable moments in the week for me is getting the *Financial Times Weekend Edition*. The supplement has all kinds of articles about the arts, books, flamboyant and creative people who had significant roles to play in various artistic and cultural fields; this is a world I find endlessly fascinating, as well as languages and different cultures. In fact, when I left high school and before entering university, I went to the Middle East because I wanted to learn Arabic. Young people don't analyze their motives as they do when they get older; let's say there was just something that simply attracted me to it. There were just so many elements, such as the sound of the language, the script, the culture, and a certain magic that were all fascinating for me.

In music, also, I have broad tastes. Music in itself, if it is well done, remains totally essential for me regardless of the period or genre involved, even if it is far removed from the world of early music. The most important aspect of a reaction to music, for me, is the intuitive part. Although a lot of the music we play is born within a sort of exclusivist environment, this in no way precludes the possibility of the same music reaching out to a broad public today. Of course, the more you know about instruments, tunings, counterpoint, and practices of the time, the more you can appreciate it. All of this preparation will clearly enrich the listener's experience. However, the main



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poetic moment of music-making, whether contemporary or that from 500 years ago, remains very similar.

How did the lute finally enter into your period of youthful wanderlust?

During my first year at Harvard, I was studying classical guitar, and en route to visiting a friend at Radcliffe, I would often walk past a house where I could see a chest of viols hanging on the wall through the window. One day, I simply rang the bell, and a very nice gentleman answered the door; he was an MIT professor, Arthur Loeb. He and his wife Lotje were both fans of the viola da gamba. I asked him all about the instrument and told him it looked so beautiful that I wanted to learn to play it. He got me in touch with his gamba teacher, a lady called Gian Lyman who was then

teaching at Longy School of Music in Cambridge, and that was the beginning. One day, I went to my gamba lesson and played some Renaissance pieces on the guitar for her, ones that I was preparing for a concert. Gian said, "Oh, if you're interested in this type of music, you really should try the lute." She actually arranged for me to borrow a lute that was part of the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, not an historical instrument, but a so-called "work lute" for students to use.

After playing on it for a year, I decided to order one for myself. In fact even before I had an instrument to work with, I was already attending rehearsals of the collegium musicum at Brandeis University, which was directed by Joel Cohen. Using Joel's lute, I played a single line in polyphonic works by Dufay and Josquin.

That was such a refreshing moment in the week for me; I loved being a part of this world of sound, I loved the music, and I loved performing, which was something I missed at Harvard. Don't forget, at that time there wasn't much early music activity at Harvard to speak of.

Nonetheless, my general musical training at Harvard was a great experience – you had to really know the piano, went through a thorough training in harmony, ear-training and transposing in all keys, counterpoint and all the rest. Another very important aspect of my study at Harvard was the time spent working independently under John Ward, an important figure in the world of musicology. He had a top-notch mind, and as a teacher was very provocative and stimulating. He made you think

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through a thing yourself, redo it, go deeper each time, a training that has proven itself useful in every project that I have undertaken ever since. He also made me aware of how important it was to train the eye to look at music as well as the ear to hear it.

I first heard you in a very small-scale concert at one of the buildings on the campus at Harvard; it must have been 1971 or 1972 when I was studying at the New England Conservatory.... Today we are sitting here together, almost 38 years later, and you have never stopped or slowed down in your travels across the globe, performing and teaching. How on earth do you do it?

You know there are different answers to this. First of all it is not just an urge to go everywhere, but to make music that is an integral part of my life. People often ask me: "Isn't this very taxing?" and "How do you manage all the negative sides of traveling?" But if you enjoy playing concerts of music that you love, for appreciative audiences, and you take time in between to keep your balance, then on tour you are often much closer

to leading an artist's life than you would be at home giving lessons and answering emails, despite the attractiveness of domestic life.

Very often I am glad to get on the plane and head off to play somewhere where I can just focus on the one thing that is most central to my artistic life. So, it is not an eagerness to be celebrated here and there, it is the chance to live the moment of creativity and the gratification you get from focusing on doing things the way you like to do them.

Sometimes there are exceptional moments in concerts when, under certain conditions, a communion evolves between the audience, the instrument, and the hall. You become a part of a very creative, dynamic state of living the music to its fullest. These moments of exceptional receptivity are rare, but they do happen and you remember them vividly.

It sounds almost Buddhist in a way....

Well, let's say.... I don't know so much about Buddhism, but there are moments where this kind of communion is almost on a religious level. And

being a musician on an instrument with such a beautiful sound, and such a rich solo repertoire, means that in your daily work, you can also be in touch with this.

When you imagine how the lute must have sounded in homes and salons and then compare it to the situation performing in a large hall, I imagine that you must have to use some physical and/or psychological technique to reach out and fill the space around you?

Actually, the size of a hall is a factor, but not always the determining factor in judging if it is a good place to play or not. Sometime you can have small halls for 100-200 people that are so dead that you would rather be in a larger hall. And there are some large halls seating 600-800 people that have a wonderful sound. I recently played in a hall in Bucharest, for instance, at the Romanian Athenaeum, with its oval-shaped hall, more than 100 years old, and a high ceiling and a lot of stained glass decoration, seating about 800 people – it is a great place for a quiet instrument. Or take the Mozart-Saal in the Konzerthaus Vienna, where I have played several times. Despite its size (700 seats), it is surprisingly intimate; the audiences there are very receptive as well, which also makes it special.

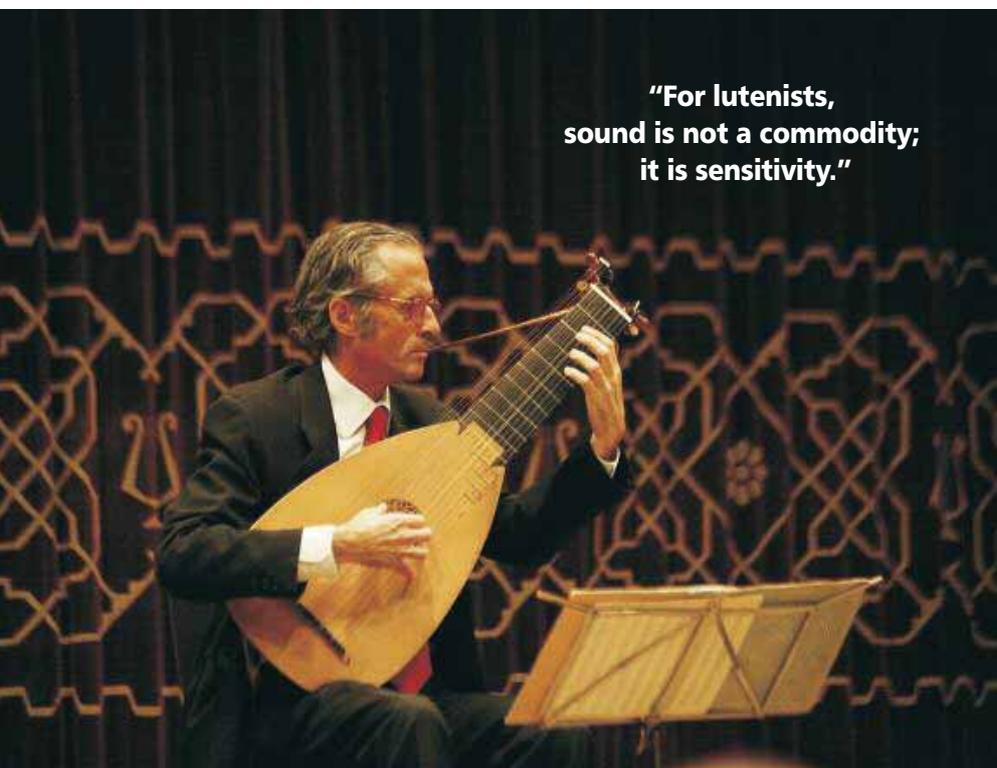
Understood, but what about when the hall just doesn't work along with you? It is very hard to imagine a more uncomfortable place for a lutenist.

For instance, at one of the radio concert halls, the acoustic was bad; there were lots of background noises like ventilation systems, and all the rest. The only solution for me in such a moment is to focus on the clarity of sound and not force the sound or fight against the ambience around you. I learned years ago that to fight doesn't help, it just creates other problems. It isn't pleasant to perform in such a hall, but in the end it is surprising how much does come across if you are able to focus yourself.

What about practicing and preparing for concerts? I think especially the right hand might be like a ballet dancer, always requiring attention to muscle training and coaxing every day?

Yes, for me that's true.... For

**"For lutenists,
sound is not a commodity;
it is sensitivity."**



lutenists, sound is not a commodity; it is sensitivity. One has to, or better said I have to, continually research and refresh the sense of touch on the instrument, always going deeper and deeper into the sound. I still feel that I am discovering new ways of using the instrument that only come about because of this constant search for the most direct and unencumbered connection between my innermost feelings and the sound that is actually produced by the strings.

Talking about sound production on the lute and having seen you teach from close by, do you have any comments about the early music scene at present?

It is hard for me to say, since I am not really keeping track of everything in the early music scene and am so busy with my own projects all the time. But I do feel we have lost something compared with the way things were years ago. I mean, when I was a student, we had to really research and question and look for sources and manuscripts, make discoveries, even write out the music by hand if the library didn't allow copies, and it was often time-consuming, but enriching at the same time.... Today, so much material is available in reprints, or on the Internet, just there for the taking; my feeling is that this makes us all a little blasé and makes us forget what a gift it is to have this music for present generations. Much of this music was very hard to find even back in the periods when it was composed and written out, often only existing in a few sources.

Another issue is the way students tend to work today; it seems that they want to make their careers while they are studying at the conservatory instead of devoting all their energy to getting to know every aspect of their instrument. You know, the time spent at the conservatory is a precious thing; once your career starts, there is almost never the kind of rest and calm for studying like one has at school. Students tend not to realize this. I am afraid the speed of the world we live in and the pressures of music-making today are forcing young musicians forward at too fast a pace.

You have often mentioned the influence of Emil Pujol on your musical develop-

ment as a young man. Can you share with us some of the experiences you had with him during your studies?

You know, he influenced so many parts of my feelings about the world, actually. He was a person who nourished his soul with the beauty of sound, and the whole question of touch was very important for him. At the same time he possessed almost saint-like qualities; it just felt good being near him and playing music for him. And, of course, he had studied with Francisco Tárrega, one of the great guitar figures of the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, so he knew not only all kinds of interesting stories and anecdotes about Tárrega, but also had a thorough knowledge of guitar technique and had thought through so many aspects of guitar playing that were invaluable for me to learn about.

He was one of the people who inspired me in many more ways than just by his musicianship. He was also among the first performers on the vihuela at that time. Of course, the instruments available then were heavier than historic models and the techniques for playing vihuela were strongly influenced by the modern guitar. Nonetheless, I believe it was in 1956 at a concert in Barcelona that he or anyone else first performed vihuela music in public in the 20th century. He was 50 at the time; I had the chance to play at the 100th anniversary of his birth in the very same hall years later. You know, when I studied with him, he was already an older man, and I was in my early 20s, at a very formative stage in my musical development. He talked about art and higher ideals and being an artist and one's artistic personality. These were things I never heard about in the States before. He was deeply linked to this rather European, and more specifically Spanish and Catalan, tradition of artistic endeavor.

I think that for Americans involved with European musical traditions, it is very important to study here, to experience culture in a very direct way and not just via courses and books and research. There are cultural perceptions that you cannot obtain from reading, like the look and sound of a particular chapel, the color of a painting when you stand right

in front of it, or an audience's reaction. One needs to experience those firsthand. Europe has deep cultural roots that are important to come into contact with. America is essentially a rootless society, and this can stimulate all kinds of imaginative, energetic, and creative solutions that might not occur to the European. It's important for one to know the other.

Other lutenists started out concentrating on the solo literature and then continued by working within ensembles or starting up their own. Is your world of plucked strings ever going to give way to a greater interest for ensembles?

You know, I love to play in ensembles and groups, and in the beginning of my career I had mostly ensemble work and perhaps one solo concert per year; gradually, this balance changed and the solo repertoire took the upper hand. Mostly I am glad to remain within this huge repertoire; there is still much to do and to be discovered.

I could, however, be tempted to conduct. But, I don't think I will get around to it this time. I have a feeling that if I started to conduct, I would lose touch with the thing that is closest to my heart. What especially attracts me is not only early music but also Stravinski, Mahler, or Berg. Recently I heard a performance of Berg's opera *Lulu* here in Basel that was so amazing that I went twice. The staging was superficial, but the conductor was able to bring everything out of the score and achieved colors, tuning, and balance within the orchestra that one rarely hears, even in Baroque ensembles today. It was a real eye- and ear-opener.

I love early music and the world I have chosen for myself, but have to say that for me music is something above and perhaps even outside time, space, and period. Every type of music, if performed with feeling, sincerity, and passion, has a value that goes far beyond the thoughts and fashion of any one period in history. 

Theodore Diehl is a freelance journalist working for a variety of publications, such as the *Financial Times* (London) and *Revolution Magazine* (Singapore). An amateur lutenist, he studied harpsichord with Gustav Leonhardt at the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam.

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